

Austin Tri-Hawk Soars

Productivity a Product of Workplace Culture

By Tom Schuman

If one is feeling the blues, he or she is typically depressed, dejected, disheartened or down in the dumps.

If an associate at Austin Tri-Hawk Automotive (ATA) sees the blues, the opposite holds true. Delighted, pleased or at ease would be appropriate adjectives. Why? Everything that is a result of improvement ideas is painted blue.

There is a whole lot of blue at ATA, a Japanese-owned company that produces automotive metal products and assemblies. More than 160 body structure parts are supplied for Subaru, its largest customer, and its production facility in Lafayette. The original 140,000 square-foot building (a 40,000-square-foot addition is now under roof) opened in mid-1999.

Excellence, precision and cleanliness are a few of the words ATA President John Newman uses to describe the Scott County facility. He talks of the “transition mode” all managers and associates go through as they walk up the sidewalk from the parking lot to enter the building.

Open communication, extensive training, safety first and an inverted structure that puts the “people who touch the product” at the top of the organizational chart are all hallmarks that make ATA more than just a place to work.

“Everybody is working on continuous improvement,” says Newman, who has worked in the industry and operated stamping plants in various U.S. locations for the last 18 years. “There’s always a way to make things better, to get more people involved. If you do well in continuous improvement, that leads to higher productivity.”

Previous posts for Newman normally included going in and fixing problems. The opportunity to start with a clean slate, to be able to incorporate some of the Japanese culture (kaizen is the



Production at Austin Tri-Hawk Automotive takes place in a facility dominated by meaningful color, required cleanliness and precise organization.

Japanese term for supporting continual improvement through people and technology) and to take advantage of a cross-cultural exchange of engineering and technology advancements is a situation he relishes.

“It’s OK to make a mistake as long as we learn from it and don’t make it again,” Newman theorizes. “We stumble, we learn, and we get up and go on. We’re nowhere where we need to be, but excellence is a journey, not a destination.”

Small processes, big results

Excellence comes in many forms, big and small. Often it’s the little things that added together make employees comfortable and willing to embrace and even initiate change.

Among the examples provided by Newman and Mike Murry, human resources manager:

- Plant-wide involvement in implementation of new policies and procedures. A committee researched alternatives for the recent presenteeism (a more positive approach than absenteeism) policy, which was formulated and posted for additional associate input
- Perfect attendance program and annual dinner celebration
- A weekly best practices communication meeting (more than 100 continuous improvement suggestions were on the agenda the last week of January)
- A team concept that brings together associates from different areas. Managers serve as coaches for the employee-driven teams, with team performances and results well documented and rewarded
- A weekly plant-wide audit, again conducted by the management team to show its commitment and involvement
- In-depth internal communication through television screens, bulletin boards and additional posting of information in

common areas

- A fork truck indicator lighting system that enhances both safety and productivity
- Color-coded poles on the plant floor – a phone can be found on purple, a fire extinguisher on red, etc.

“We start with a culture that says, ‘we care.’ Safety is our No.1 priority,” Murry explains. “Every staff meeting, every correspondence starts with safety. The management presence – managers

doing data entry, counting inventory – is important. Staffing is getting the right people the right skills at the right time.”

Newman adds, “We try very hard not to focus on people, but focus on processes. What we do should be consistent, and it should be simple. Communication is so important in a facility like this. We try to communicate as much as possible visually.”

Putting ideas to work

The concepts listed above and more are in place. Practical application makes them successful.

Example 1: Machinery attachments that hold needed clipboards, pens, wrenches and other equipment that make it easier get the job done. An example of 5S – a place for everything and everything in its place. And yes, they are painted blue.

Example 2: A six-inch rule for all equipment, tables and benches not required to sit directly on the floor. Why? If there is less than six inches between the item and the floor, Newman notes, you can’t get a broom underneath for necessary cleaning.

Example 3: A welder that serves two adjacent machines is placed on an in-house constructed turntable to allow for easy movement.

Newman: “It would have taken a few seconds to move the welder. That adds up to a few minutes and that adds up to dollars over the course of a year.”

ATA is steadily increasing its use of robotics. High standards and consistency of performance are more important than ever in the highly competitive auto industry. Is the company able to meet the challenges?

The policies and procedures, the implementation and execution all establish a workplace culture. With associates comfortable, knowing they are part of an overall team effort, they are ready, willing and able to tackle change.

“We just went through a technology revision with our robots. Our welding guns changed,” Newman notes. “Our folks jumped in with both feet. We sent people to



ATA utilizes four large presses, including this 2,000-ton model.

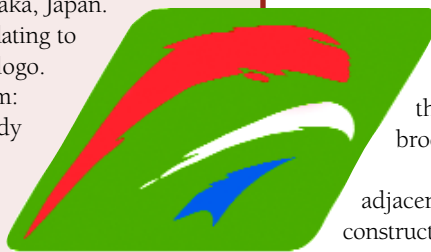
Name, Logo Carry Significance

The primary parent company of Austin Tri-Hawk Automotive (ATA) is Kikuchi Press, originally based in Mitaka, Japan. Mi means three, while taka mans hawk – translating to three hawks, the company name and the ATA logo.

The logo colors carry a special symbolism:

- The top curved area (red) represents the body of a hawk in flight, soaring high above the ground, circling and surveying the world. It is a reminder of the strength and superiority of having a global vision
- The middle curved area (white) represents a hawk tending to its family in the nest. The company desires to have a pure, family-like environment offering a nurturing, educational, positive atmosphere for all associates
- The bottom curved area (blue) represents a hawk with its wings up and claws stretched down in targeting position. The image is a reminder of goal setting and illustrates achievement through incredible precision and proficiency

The three colors combined together form an outline of a hawk’s head, and represent unity and teamwork. In addition, the green background symbolizes the company’s dedication to the environment. ATA leadership strives for the company “to leave the world a better place than we found it.”





John Newman educates other manufacturers on some of ATA's statistical analysis.

robotics schools for the proper training. Our in-house people worked closely with the Japanese technical staff.”

A comprehensive computer operations system collects information from the shop floor. At a recent NAMCI (Network for the Advancement of Manufacturing in Central Indiana) meeting, Newman and two associates displayed an approximately 6-foot-long chart of statistical analyses.

“All of the information feeds back into efficiencies and helps us become more productive,” asserts Newman, who adds that many existing companies don’t know where to start when it comes to change. “People who have been there, who are acclimated to the system, are at disadvantage. Someone new who comes into the system brings with them different mindsets, different thought processes.”

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Austin Tri-Hawk Automotive at (812) 794-0062 or www.tri-hawk.com